

back to our regularly scheduled programming, under the leadership of old what's his name over here. [*Laughter*]

Q. What does this say for Joe's credibility when I asked him yesterday if McCurry was leaving? [*Laughter*]

The President. Did he say no or not yet?

Q. He didn't say no—yes, he said no; he didn't say not yet.

The President. Well, the answer yesterday was no. [*Laughter*] The answer today is no. But at sometime in the near future, the answer will be yes.

Mike, thank you so much.

Q. —sir, is there anything else you can do about the drought conditions, the heat wave? Is there other stuff we ought to be thinking about?

The President. Well, we're looking at it. I wish I could seed the clouds and make it rain. But this is very disturbing. We're going to be looking at it. In all the States, I'm sure there are vigorous efforts going on through the State emergency offices, and my understanding is—I've asked for an update, I didn't get it before I came out here, of the volunteer efforts that are going on. This happened to me once when I was Governor, and we had to move a lot of seniors into our senior citizen centers, because they were air-conditioned, and just set up cots. And we were handing out, literally, hundreds and hundreds of fans to people who had no air-conditioning in their homes.

We can give the money out, and we're going to look and see what else we can do. We're going to look and see whether we can get some more help from other States, perhaps, that aren't so hard-hit. Actually, ironically, a few more than half of our States are having temperatures slightly below normal this year. But these 11, there are some more above the 11 who are a little above average, but these are 20 percent above average in the hottest months. So we're looking at it. If I can determine anything else I can do, believe me, I will do it, because there are an awful lot of people that just cannot take this heat without some more help. And we'll do whatever we can.

Q. Mr. President, how serious is this Iranian missile test?

The President. I'll answer all the other questions when I—I'll be glad to answer the questions, but I just—I want to wait to let you do this thing with Mike, and then I'll see you about an hour or whenever.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:15 p.m. in the Briefing Room at the White House. A tape was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.

Remarks Following a Meeting on Agricultural Assistance and an Exchange With Reporters

July 23, 1998

The President. After the clicking stops, here's what I want to do. [*Laughter*] As you can all see, I'm here with Senator Daschle, Senator Harkin, Senator Conrad, Senator Dorgan, and Secretary Glickman, Deputy Secretary Rominger; and these young people here are national officers of the FFA.

In a few moments, I'm going to do a national radio press conference with agricultural reporters from agricultural radio networks around the country. I've got a brief statement here that I would like to read, and then I'd like to give the Senators a chance to make whatever comments they would like to make. And then I will do what I said I'd do in the pressroom a while ago, I'll let you all ask some questions, if you have questions on other subjects, and then we'll go do the ag press conference.

We're here because all of us are profoundly concerned about the communities that are suffering from both low prices and all kinds of natural disasters around the country. In Texas, about three quarters of the cotton crop has been lost. Senator Dorgan said the other day that North Dakota retired auctioneers are being pressed into duty to handle all the families that are being forced to sell their farms.

For 5½ years we've worked hard to help America's farm families with disaster assistance to ranchers who've lost livestock, surplus commodity purchases for school lunches, diversifying the sources of enterprise and income in rural America. We've increased our use of export credits by a third in the last year alone.

This year's farm crisis demands that we do more. On Saturday I directed Secretary Glickman to buy more than 80 million bushels of wheat to help lift prices for American farmers and ease hunger in the developing world. Today I'm announcing that we are providing disaster assistance for farmers in Texas—the entire State has been declared a disaster area—to help those whose crops and livestock have been ravaged by the drought. I believe today is the 18th day in a row that it's above 100 degrees in Dallas, Texas. Next week I will send Secretary Glickman to Texas and Oklahoma to assess what other help is needed.

As we head into the conference, I ask all of you young people who are here to go back home and help us to do whatever we can to pass the \$500 million in emergency farmer and rancher assistance contained in the amendment sponsored by Senators Conrad and Dorgan and strongly supported by our ranking Democrat on the committee, Senator Harkin, and our leader, Senator Daschle.

We also have to help to revive the rural economy with exports. We have to give the International Monetary Fund the resources it needs to strengthen the Asian economies. Let me tell you how big a deal this is. About 40 to 50 percent of all American grain production is exported; 40 percent of all the exports go to Asia. We have a 30 percent decline in farm exports to Asian countries—excluding China and Japan—they're down about 13 percent in Japan; they're down about 6 percent in China, 30 percent in the other countries this year because of the Asian financial crisis.

The International Monetary Fund is designed to reform those economies and boost them. They need money in order to buy our food. It is not a very complicated thing. But I have asked for this since January now. I was very disturbed to see in the morning press there's been another decision to delay a vote on this in the House of Representatives. I think it is a big mistake. I am doing what I can to continue to boost food exports. I don't believe that they should be subject to sanctions and our policies except under the most extreme circumstances. And I believe we have to do more.

Finally, I want to do whatever I can to strengthen the farm safety net. We should expand eligibility for direct and guaranteed loans, improve the crop insurance program which simply is not working for too many farmers, and extend marketing loans when the prices are low. We have to give farmers more flexibility in planning when to receive Federal income support. They ought to be able to get these payments early. I proposed that last spring. I saw that there was some support for that in the House leadership last week, and I'm grateful for that, but I'd like to pass that and get it out and do it soon.

All these things I think will help. But we have to understand we've got a price crisis in America today because of high worldwide crop production, the decline of the Asian economies, and the decline in the currencies of so many countries relative to the dollar, which means they can't buy as much food; that's why the IMF is important. We also have a disaster problem because of the drought and other significant natural problems. And no farmer should go broke because of an act of God. So that's our policy, and we're going to try to implement it.

And I'd like to give the Senators a chance to make a few remarks, and then I'll answer your other questions.

Senator Daschle.

[At this point, Senator Thomas A. Daschle made brief remarks.]

The President. Senator Harkin.

[At this point, Senator Tom Harkin made brief remarks.]

The President. The North Dakota Senators—I think North Dakota, I should say for the benefit of the national press, I believe has had the largest drop in farm income in any State of the country by a good stretch.

[At this point, North Dakota Senators Kent Conrad and Byron L. Dorgan made brief remarks.]

The President. Well, let me just make one more comment about this, and then I'll answer your questions.

When the freedom to farm bill was passed, those of us who came from farming areas knew that it had a lot of very good provisions.

It got the Government out of micromanaging farming; it gave farmers more freedom to make their own planting decision; it had terrific conservation provisions; it had good rural development provisions. But it did not have an adequate safety net. We all knew it at the time. And there were those, and there still are some, who believe that we really don't need one.

But I just think that's wrong. To go back to what Senator Harkin said, I believe if you look at the trends in world population growth and agricultural production elsewhere, in most normal years for the next 30 years, American farmers should do better and better and better. This would be a very good time for a whole generation of our farmers. But the average farmer is about 59 years old in America today.

So what I'm worried about is that, you know, you get a bad year or two like this coming along without an adequate safety net in this bill, then you wind up changing the whole structure of agriculture in ways that I don't think are good for America.

So we're going to work on this. We're going to try to get it done. But I do say to the young people here, I agree with Senator Harkin, I think the future trends around the world look quite good for America's farmers if we can get through this rough spot.

Thank you.

Q. Why can't you lawmakers convince your fellows on the Hill? I mean, what is the holdup?

The President. Well, don't you think your bill will pass? I think it'll pass.

Senator Dorgan. It passed the Senate. We've got to get it through conference and I think we'll get it—

The President. And the Senate passed the International Monetary Fund.

Senator Harkin. Yes. And we've got the indemnity fund in there.

Senator Conrad. We're about to—

The President. You're about to—but you're going to pass it.

Q. What's the problem?

The President. The problem is in the House, and we just have to hope that they will follow the lead of the Senate here.

Iran-U.S. Relations

Q. Mr. President, what impact do you see the missile test having on your efforts to try and warm relations with Iran?

The President. Well, we've been following this for some time. And we knew that Iran was attempting to develop this capability. It's just a test. But if they—obviously, if they were to develop an intermediate range missile, it could change the regional stability dynamics in the Middle East. And that's why we've worked so hard with North Korea and with others to try to get them not to transfer missiles and missile technology to Iran.

If we do continue to have an opening of relations because the new President seems more open to it, obviously this is one of the things I would raise with him. We've been very concerned about this. And we believe that the future of the Middle East would be better if they'd invest more money, all those countries, in something other than military technology.

So we're very, very concerned about it, but not surprised by it.

Q. [Inaudible]

The President. One at a time. Obviously, it is an obstacle. But I don't think it's an argument for closing off all avenues of opportunity. The country is in a dynamic state now. There's some dynamism there, and there's some reason to believe that—it seems to me that at least making it clear what our position is on that, on the Middle East peace process, on terrorism, support of terrorism, on all these issues with which we've had problems with Iran in the past, and still being glad that there's some movement toward greater popular government, more openness in the country argues for what we're doing—a cautious, deliberate approach.

Fast-Track Trade Legislation

Q. Mr. President, besides the IMF bill, high on the farm agenda is fast-track legislation. Why not go along with Speaker Gingrich and schedule a vote—a September vote on this?

The President. First of all, I strongly support fast track, as you know. I was bitterly disappointed that we couldn't pass it earlier. And he and I both worked very hard to pass it. There is no evidence that one single vote

has changed. If anything, there's some evidence that we'd have more trouble passing it.

So if we bring it up in a bill that also has the International Monetary Fund or the Africa trade bill or the Caribbean Basin initiative—all of which I think are good for America—the impact would be, in all probability, to kill them all and to make it even harder to pass fast track early next year. I still believe we'll pass fast track next year when we get beyond this election year. I think it is so evidently in the best interest of the country. That's the first answer.

The second point is, the International Monetary Fund funding will do much more good in the short run because it puts money into the countries that want to buy our food today. Fast track gives the United States the power to open new markets in the future, to enter negotiations to open new markets in the future.

So it's not terribly significant whether we get the fast-track legislation in August, let's say, or September or January or February next year or March, because we still have to start the negotiations and open new markets. We're already going to negotiate in opening agricultural markets, for example, within the World Trade Organization to try to deal with the European subsidy issue that was mentioned earlier.

So I'm strongly for fast track. I think we will pass it next year. I have no evidence that a single vote has changed since it was not passed earlier, and I don't want to kill all the rest of that. We ought to pass the Africa trade bill now, the modified Caribbean Basin bill now. But most important of all, dwarfing everything else, in the near term for these farmers with their prices low is the International Monetary Fund funding, because that will float cash into these countries as a condition for reform, and it will give the money to buy our food. That's more important.

Middle East Peace Process

Q. Why have you thrown in the towel on the Middle East?

The President. Well, we haven't. I saw that story. That's just not so.

Let me say first of all, if I thought the process were over, I would say it was over. We have continued intense negotiations to this day with both sides, based on the ideas we advanced earlier, which, as you know, were accepted in principle by Mr. Arafat and not by Mr. Netanyahu, but a negotiation ensued.

Secretary Albright has worked very, very hard on this. We have made a not inconsiderable amount of progress. But differences remain. We haven't thrown in the towel because I think it's a lot better to get an agreement, to get them into final status talks than it is to give up and let this thing drift dangerously toward conflict and dissolution.

So if we come to a time when I think it's hopeless, I'll say it's hopeless and that ideas weren't accepted. But right now, I'm not prepared to say that. I think there's still a chance we can get an agreement, and we're going to keep working for it.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:45 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Chairman Yasser Arafat of the Palestinian Authority; and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel. A tape was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.

Remarks in a Teleconference With Rural Radio Stations on Agricultural Issues and Farming July 23, 1998

[Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman, acting as moderator of the teleconference, made brief opening remarks and introduced the President.]

The President. Thank you very much, Secretary Glickman. And I want to thank you all for giving me a chance to speak to people in rural America.

Today, most of our fellow citizens are enjoying the dividends of the strongest American economy in a generation. We have the lowest unemployment rate in 28 years. We're about to have the first balanced budget and surplus in 29 years, with the highest homeownership in American history. But with the economic crisis in Asia hurting our farm exports, with crop prices squeezed by abundant world supplies, and with farms devastated by